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# A Sea of Faith?

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*The use of Mediterranean paradigms is a heuristic strategy with costs as well as gains. Other paradigms have been more influential in the study of ancient religion. Their weaknesses may be compared to the difficulties Mediterranean paradigms have in accounting for religious change and in linking environment to spirituality. Few, if any, religious forms or practices can be shown to be characteristic of and exclusive to the Mediterranean. A brief consideration of the spatial distribution of ancient cults suggests that other factors were more influential than geographical considerations.*

How useful is the concept of 'the Mediterranean' to the study of ancient religions? Were there characteristically Mediterranean forms of belief or patterns of cult? Did the ancient Mediterranean frame a cultural or social *koine* characterized by common modes of relating to the divine? What did the religions of the peoples living around the Mediterranean have in common? How far did travel (or connectivity<sup>1</sup>) between the shores and islands of the inland sea encourage the development of a common language of cult? Did ancient Mediterranean societies or cultures have a common cosmological orientation?

Most of these questions I shall answer in the negative: not very useful, no, no, not very much, to only a small extent, and not so far as we can see. Perhaps it is not surprising that ecology and geography exert less of an influence on fields such as religion and art than they do on, let us say, agriculture and diet. But posing the question in this form is not a wholly futile exercise. First, religion offers us a special perspective from which to examine Mediterranean paradigms in general. Second, it invites us to confront issues of the large-scale spatial organization of religion in antiquity that have been marginalized by the paradigms that are currently fashionable. What follows is little more than a few remarks on each of these subjects: both demand either the briefest or the lengthiest of treatments, and this is no place for the latter.

## MEDITERRANEANISM AS STRATEGY

Mediterraneanism is fundamentally a choice. It is one among many heuristic strategies available to ancient historians, and, like all analytical strategies,

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it has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. Mediterraneanism has been a compelling choice for some scholars, among them ethnographers and anthropologists as well as historians and classicists. Some have reached this position through observing empirical similarities, for example in notions of honour or demography. Others have been struck by the broad climatic, vegetational, and geomorphological characteristics of the region, notwithstanding its fragmentation into a multitude of highly differentiated microregions. The physical centrality of the sea within the Greek world and the Roman empire and the fact that the greatest cities of classical antiquity are located on its shores has made the Mediterranean an obvious focus of interest for classicists.

For many students of antiquity, Mediterraneanism offers a special kind of Grand Narrative. It is one in which certain conditions of human life are deemed to remain, if not stable, at least subject only to slow, secular transformations. These factors are held to be highly influential, to put it no more strongly, in shaping human action and promoting particular ways of living. Mediterraneanism, so conceived, is not environmental determinism, but all plausible and well-worked-out Mediterranean paradigms accord a major explanatory role to geographical factors. Views of this kind are today inevitably labelled Braudelian, although they have older roots and have been much elaborated since his masterpiece was published.<sup>2</sup>

There is a sense, too, in which Mediterraneanism could be termed a Grand Anti-Narrative, since by its very emphasis on enduring structures and *la longue durée* it seems to accommodate change only awkwardly. The Mediterraneanist historian is challenged either to explain how history throws off the constraints of the environment or else to follow Braudel in disengaging the history of events from the history of structures and institutions. The latter course entails costs of its own, in effect minimizing the potential impact of 'events' on structures. So the Persian Wars and the battle of Actium are, rightly or wrongly, rendered inconsequential for the history of the *polis* or the economy of the Mediterranean, and the conversion of Constantine becomes an epiphenomenal detail of a religious history written only in terms of trends, never of discontinuities. As does Marxism, then, Mediterraneanism rules out certain kinds of historical narratives. More subtly, it offers moderns a fantasy of access to a familiarized antiquity, a world shaped by eternal qualities of light and earth and moral tone. More than one eminent classicist has succumbed to the romantic lure of the inland sea; indeed, it is something of an occupational hazard. A potent blend of intellectual Grand Tourism and philhellenism has been particularly influential in classical archaeology.<sup>3</sup> It is very easy to forget that the Mediterranean is no more a natural unit of analysis than it is a natural unity or a natural geographical region. Hence the need for these preliminary remarks.

Nor is choosing Mediterraneanism politically innocent. The mild world of academic politics presents numerous illustrations. 'Mediterranean studies' programmes flourish in many British and North American universities as more acceptable alternatives to 'Classics' or 'Classical Civilization'. The change of label not only sheds the Eurocentric and culturally élitist connotations of 'Classics' but also (more positively) opens up the possibility of including some elements of Egyptology, Near Eastern studies, and the like. But we have only to consider the contrast with 'Oriental studies' to realize that geographically defined area-studies programmes are only contingently politically correct rather than incorrect.

Mediterraneanism may also operate euphemistically. For example, many of the unifying features of what some social anthropologists term traditional Mediterranean societies derive from the economic and political marginalization of much of southern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But that formulation, which stresses the modernity of the plight of the region's inhabitants, flies in the face of the ethnographic hunt for authentic survivals of a traditional pre-modern order as well as of romantic notions of an unchanging Mediterranean. Olive-oil-rich diets, healthy outdoor lifestyles, exotic honour codes, and ubiquitous godparenthood are not relics of a happier age but the consequences of poverty and weak states. Even today, the economic and political heart of the European Community coincides pretty well with Charlemagne's kingdom, and much of the northern shore of Mediterranean Europe is in the subsidized periphery of the Union rather than in the subsidizing core. It is no coincidence that Mediterraneanism can be recruited to more serious political ends. The Mediterraneanism of Provence and Cataluña distinguishes them within nation-states with non-Mediterranean centres of political gravity, while that of Greece and Israel detaches them from the Balkans and the Middle East respectively.

Mediterraneanism, in all these cases, employs a common rhetoric. It is a choice that excludes other options, and excludes them without naming them. The geographical label *naturalizes* that choice, a common feature of ideological discourse. It seeks to root one perspective among many in the supposedly stable forms of the land and of the sea. When, as historians, we choose 'Mediterraneanism', we must do so knowingly, aware of what alternative paradigms we are thereby excluding and at what cost and to whom.

Religions have been studied through many different paradigms. Some emphasize descent, resolving the complexity of those religions we can observe into the traces of simpler, archaic forms and their later developments and accretions. Comparative approaches designed to reconstruct the common religious forms of shared ancestors are one variant of this method. Other paradigms emphasize the social and/or political context of cults.

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Each paradigm carries with it an implicit ranking of evidential categories, a ranking that answers some or all of the following questions: Is myth a better guide to the religious logic of society than the means by which religious authority is established? Are rituals more important than sacred texts? Is the present tense of religion more important than its history? Are worshippers' experiences more central than the pronouncements of religious specialists? At stake in these choices is the category of 'religion' itself. Choosing between paradigms, then, involves choosing a definition of religion, a body of evidence, and a methodological tool-kit for its investigation. Eclecticism is rarely an option for those who want their arguments to be coherent. Choosing to 'think Mediterranean' has implications for all these issues.

#### CHOOSING PARADIGMS FOR ANCIENT RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Evaluating the utility of Mediterranean paradigms for religious history has to mean evaluating their utility *relative to the alternatives*. Yet it would be very difficult to develop a comprehensive account of all the paradigms employed for the study of ancient religions or even a typology of those in most common use at the present time. The bibliography that would have to be surveyed is vast. More serious is that every account of ancient religion necessarily entails a metahistorical account of the shape and the development of its study. Mine is no exception. There is no neutral perspective from which to survey the field. What I seek to do here is to exemplify and compare some prominent paradigms in religious history with which any Mediterraneanist version would have to compete.

It should be understood from the start that I am largely dealing with hypotheticals. No theory of 'Mediterranean religion' is currently available, however often the term is used. It is reasonably clear why this is so. Any approach that begins from the material world – that of the *Annalists*, for example, or one framed in terms of historical materialism – has to work hard to avoid emptying out the *significant* content of cults and rituals. By this I mean that it is relatively easy to identify the social, political, and even economic *functions* of cultic acts and religious organizations but that any account that stops at that point is reductionist to the point of being completely unsatisfactory.<sup>4</sup>

For example, sanctuary building may have been a powerful tool in the hands of those who wished to mobilize social power in ways that led to the formation of states in the Greek Dark Age.<sup>5</sup> Extending the practice to the creation of new cities away from the mythic heartland of Greece was natural.<sup>6</sup> Common sacrifice and the ritual dining that followed it were probably already the basis of social groups larger than the family. Kleisthenes' reorganization of the cults of Attica was clearly an integral part of his attempts to break up

existing senses of community below the level of the Athenian state and to create new ones that supported and cohered with it.<sup>7</sup> The Panathenaea of classical Athens and the various processions that linked Attic shrines like that of Artemis at Brauron with those on the Acropolis may have assisted in the integration of the Attican polity.<sup>8</sup> The limited participation of Athens' allies in some festivals bound them into the empire and at the same time expressed their subordination within it,<sup>9</sup> and so on.

Yet, as the best analysts of these cults have always realized, the social and political contexts and uses of religion can never *alone* provide an adequate account of it. The narrative of 'the rise of the *polis*' has many strengths but is a poor paradigm for understanding cults that, like the Thesmophoria, were celebrated in many *poleis*, myths and rituals that predated the *polis* and are attested in literary or philosophical texts unrelated to civic ideology, the specific forms in which the panhellenic deities were depicted, and much else. The very fact that myth and cult *might be* effectively recruited to political and social ends suggests that their authority was believed to derive from sources that were extrapolitical and extrasocial. That cults and sanctuaries were occasionally or even often suborned to nonreligious ends or that the political and social context played some part in shaping Greek religion is hardly surprising, but in the end there is no alternative to the view that in some sense the Greeks believed in their myths in ways that had little to do with their immediate political or social significance and utility.<sup>10</sup> None of this is specific to antiquity. All religions do their work in the visible material world of the everyday. What makes them *religions* (as opposed to ideologies, world-views, or the like) is the common claim that they deal with more than the visible. Accounts of cult that ignore transcendence are inevitably incomplete, just as much as are those that ignore the political, social, and economic contexts of cult. The trouble with this eminently balanced view is that it relegates the physical and geographical setting to a rather small part of a comprehensive account. Yes, the Mediterranean climate may have played a part in making cult in the open air so common, and yes, the Mediterranean ecology helps explain the identity of victims of sacrifice, animal and vegetal, but all this is banal and hardly a Mediterranean paradigm.

Could we imagine a Mediterraneanist account of cult that made stronger claims than simply that religion was shaped by its material, social, and political contexts? A Marxist account of Mediterranean religion might be developed on roughly the following lines. The ecological integrity – however imagined – of the Mediterranean gives rise in each period to specific societal forms peculiarly well adapted to the means of production available in that period to exploit Mediterranean landscapes and resources. (Marxists might object at this point that the relations of production are not held to be determined by geography – that slavery, for instance, does not necessarily

arise from Mediterranean ecology – but for the moment let us leave this objection aside.) Once these societal forms are postulated, it might be possible to envisage the development of particular religious forms that would be especially well suited to these conditions and perhaps distinct from those developing at the same time in neighbouring regions with a rather different ecology. To schematize, arid Mediterranean littorals plus iron, writing, and some other key technologies produce the *polis* and the *polis* produces Mediterranean polytheism.<sup>11</sup>

But there are many problems with this view (quite apart from the one that our hypothetical Marxist colleagues have already pointed out). If we were to grant that the economy and politics in some sense determined religion (if, in other words, we were prepared to treat religion as superstructural or epiphenomenal to other more fundamental orders), it would be difficult to see how religious change could ever disrupt the earthly order. Yet Christianization and the spread of Islam, to name just two religious movements, evidently did just this. While it is easy enough to see how certain political, social, and maybe (but this is harder) economic and ecological factors facilitated and shaped these great religious transformations, it is very difficult to frame a plausible account in which they played a major causative role. We have returned, in fact, to the problem noted above, that Mediterranean paradigms are not particularly helpful in accounting for change. As an explanatory context, the Mediterranean will always offer more to synchronic than to diachronic analyses.

The historiography of the study of ancient religions shows that quite different paradigms have been much more common than materialist ones. It is sufficient to mention just a few examples. Dumézil's many studies of ancient religions<sup>12</sup> accounted for what he saw as structural similarities between various ancient religions in terms of common descent from an Indo-European archetype. Modelling his approach on the way philologists compared historically attested linguistic forms with the aim of reconstructing their common prototypes and the processes by which they had diverged, so Dumézil analyzed myths and rituals attested across a broad area from the Atlantic to the Ganges delta in the search for fundamental Indo-European cultural categories such as the famous *idéologie des trois fonctions*. This paradigm has, of course, nothing to say about the geography of the Mediterranean world. It is radically decontextualized, in fact, presenting an image of aspects of religion that seem to endure despite fundamental changes in the societies that practised them. As the histories of Christianity and Islam make clear, this is not in itself implausible, but it is very different from starting every analysis of Greek religion from the political society of the *polis*.

In fact, the paradigm that emphasizes the *civic* context of much ancient religion is in much more common usage today.<sup>13</sup> This line can be traced at least

back to Fustel de Coulanges,<sup>14</sup> who presented ancient religious institutions as intimately bound up with those of the family and the city. To be sure, there are many differences between the modern versions of this approach and that of Fustel, who, as did Dumézil after him, laid a certain amount of weight on the supposed common descent of Greeks and Romans. Modern contextualists tend to reject explanations of cults in genealogical or developmental terms, seeking to understand rituals in relation to the societies that practised them (or in which they were 'embedded'<sup>15</sup>). Some see the dominance of civic religion as a reflection of the interests of the ruling groups in those societies, while others prefer to represent it as one aspect of a cultural system oriented in general towards the city. It should be noted that these analyses do generally focus on the city as *die isolierte Stadt* rather than on an urban system or network. For Romanists, the singularity of the urbs is taken for granted, but for Greeks (along with Phoenicians, Etruscans, Latins, and the rest) each city was both a world unto itself and at the same time one element in a larger set, a set with its own dynamics and patterns of communication.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps, too, we should not assume that exchanges between cities were always structured primarily by ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, much of the power of the civic model resides in the image it conjures up of a single dominating context within which the meaning of cult, myth, and religious authority are to be found. Like Dumézil's approach, this is a paradigm that accords little if any role to the Mediterranean. To do so it would be necessary to claim the ancient city as a sociopolitical form specifically adapted to the shores of the inland sea. This is a move that the historians involved, wisely in my view, have been disinclined to make.<sup>18</sup>

Both these paradigms have their limitations. The Dumézilian emphasis on origins rather than context and use of myth makes it difficult to relate religious practice, utterance, and belief to other aspects of the lives of each group of worshippers. Myth is firmly segregated from other spheres and so, paradoxically, does not matter very much in 'real life'. Myth also has to be rather resistant to change, an idea that will seem odd to those classicists who have explored the enormous pliability of myth in drama, epic, or lyric poetry. Anyone who tried to revive Dumézil's approach would face some difficulty in relating it to modern ideas of culture, social knowledge, and religious practice. The civic paradigm is much more robust in its modern form, but it is noticeably better at handling ritual than myth and belief and is most successful when applied to societies like fifth-century Athens and the Roman republic rather than to those that preceded and followed them. When the *polis* is less central to society, in other words, civic religion provides a much more partial account of ancient cult, just as we would expect.

The paradigms I have been describing are not mutually exclusive, nor are they rigidly defined. Just as Fustel allowed common descent some importance, so Dumézil showed some appreciation of the historical context of Roman



religion.<sup>19</sup> All the same, there are limits on eclecticism. Those who stress the social and political context of cult cannot accord too much importance to survivals from an age long before the emergence of the institutions and society that provide that context. Nor can those who stress Indo-European parallels allow too much importance to city-state institutions that never existed in the Indian subcontinent.

It would be possible to elaborate this account further, but it is clear enough that ancient religion has most often been studied and described using paradigms that accord little or no role to the geography and ecology of the Mediterranean world. It is also clear that considerable difficulties would face any materialist approach that sought to show much more than the weak claim that the religions of the Mediterranean world were as influenced by that context as were other cultural, social, aesthetic, and political forms of ancient societies.

#### CHARACTERISTICALLY MEDITERRANEAN FORMS OF CULT?

An alternative approach is to begin from empirical observation and ask whether or not there are any specific rituals, modes of representation, patterns of worship, and so forth, that are (a) widespread in the ancient Mediterranean and (b) either confined to it or else significantly more common there than in neighbouring regions. The second criterion is the harder to satisfy. While several possible candidates for pan-Mediterranean religious phenomena suggest themselves, on closer examination they seem to be characteristic of much wider areas. Two linked claims will be considered here:<sup>20</sup> first, that there are some typically Mediterranean types of 'sacred site' and, second, that mobility and interchange within the Mediterranean world led to the emergence of common practices or ideas.

The strongest candidates for typically Mediterranean religious sites are peak sanctuaries, water sources, sacred groves, caves, and tombs.<sup>21</sup> Cult of one kind or another can be illustrated at each of these over a very long period, sometimes surviving shifts from one religion to another. So tomb cult can be attested from the Greek Dark Age, 'continues' in the form of hero cults and the cults of founders into the classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, and is prominent in Christianity and Islam in the form of the cult of the saints up until the present day. Peak sanctuaries are attested from the Bronze Age to the Roman period in the Aegean, where many peaks still bear the names of the prophet Elijah. Peaks, caves, and water sources share the character of being a clearly defined place, an obvious focus of attention.

We might contrast such sites with sanctuaries created by the designation of a portion of otherwise unremarkable space as sacred. Every people that has inhabited the Mediterranean, including Greeks, Romans, Christians, and Muslims, has had ways of making certain spaces sacred. It was also common

for the boundary separating sacred from profane to become the focus of rituals of various kinds. La Tène populations marked these boundaries with elaborate animal sacrifices, Greeks and Romans restricted access to a *temenos* or *templum* and demanded certain preparations before they were entered, and so on. After decades of structuralist analysis of ancient religions – yet another paradigm that might have been considered above<sup>22</sup> – it is hardly necessary to elaborate on this subject.

Peaks, springs, volcanic vents, and the like need less strenuous definition but may be exploited in many of the same ways as spaces made sacred by ritual engineering. The distinction between natural and artificial sacred places is a clumsy one. The tombs of holy men operate in many ways like deep lakes or caves in offering a connection with transcendent powers. Pilgrimages can be directed to all kinds of sacred locations.<sup>23</sup> All sacred topography is, in the end, manmade.

Many locations have produced evidence of cult in many different periods. Continuity of practice is in many cases one possible interpretation, but there are always other possibilities: striking geographical features may attract attention in more than one period, while new religions have often appropriated sites already regarded as sacred.<sup>24</sup> Ethnographic analogy also suggests that many worshippers may be less concerned about which particular religion sacralizes their site than are cult specialists or modern observers. The net product of all these processes is that there are substantial similarities between the landscapes of cult in successive periods of Mediterranean history.

There are, however, difficulties in building on these phenomena to develop a definition of Mediterranean religion. For a start, it privileges location above other dimensions of cult. Are the differences between the way Greek heroes and Christian martyrs were imagined really less consequential than where they were remembered?<sup>25</sup> This analysis seems just as reductive as some of the functionalist accounts of religion discussed above. More important, if we can only identify Mediterranean-style religion as cult that takes place in (and advantage of) the topographical discontinuities typical of Mediterranean landscapes, how strong a claim have we made? These results come close to truisms.

Most serious of all, it is not at all clear that these cultic forms are more typical of the Mediterranean world than of other regions. If not, then the support these regularities offer for the notion of 'Mediterranean religion' is much diminished. Horden and Purcell in fact draw on material from Burgundy to Baalbek in their analyses. It might be responded that during the period of the Roman empire some 'Mediterranean' forms of cult were exported deep into the continental hinterlands of the inland sea, but not all examples can be so easily dismissed. One group of cases comes from areas that were eventually incorporated into the empire but are much earlier. Late prehistoric Europe had

a long tradition of what are sometimes termed 'watery deposits'.<sup>26</sup> Sacrifices of weapons and humans at La Tène in Switzerland gave the second Iron Age its name, but deposits of this kind can be traced back through the Bronze Age to the dedication of polished axes at the heads of rivers in the Neolithic. It is more difficult to investigate the sources of the cult of sacred groves among northern European peoples, but it is probable that here too we have an independent development of cult forms that are sometimes held to be typical of the Mediterranean.

Even more damaging, it is possible to find parallels much farther afield. Peak sanctuaries were important in some pre-Columbian empires as sites of human sacrifice. Tomb cults of various kinds are also well attested in many cultures. Readers of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* may remember the description of shrines to local saints worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike. Cult at unusual rock outcroppings is known from Australia and southern Africa as well as Cappadocia – still Mediterranean? – and southern France, southwestern Scotland, and Atlantic Spain. The concentration of cult at what might be termed topographical singularities occurs throughout the world. It is not an exaggeration to say that this practice is as old as anatomically modern humans. That it has manifestations specific to Mediterranean landscapes and patterns of land use in the ancient world is no surprise, but these manifestations hardly characterize Mediterranean religion in very useful terms.

The issue also brings us up against a central question for all investigations of Mediterranean paradigms, that of the limits of 'the Mediterranean world'? This subject is now impossible to discuss without reference to *The Corrupting Sea*. Horden and Purcell argue for a broadly ecological definition, one that uses many more criteria than the much-cited limit of the area in which olives may be cultivated. The unity of the Mediterranean resides for them in a specific kind of ecological fragmentation into microregions joined to each other by a high level of 'connectivity'. The microregions develop not independently but in constant contact with each other, with these contacts sometimes simply making life liveable and occasionally triggering rapid catastrophic change which in terms of the productive economy is represented by periods of growth and collapse, intensification and abatement.

One question deferred to a promised second volume is where the system ends. Clearly, the Mediterranean world is not an isolated entity. We may choose to regard it as a mass of islands and coasts drawn together by the sea, but an alternative view, at least as old as that one, stresses the capacity of the sea to divide, defining the limits of vast continental land masses.<sup>27</sup> Even if we start from the notion of a Mediterranean world, then – as for the generals of the late Republic – once we push back behind the littoral plains it is difficult to find a logical stopping point. The dissemination of Mediterranean trade goods extends from the Sahara in the south to somewhere between the Baltic and

the Arctic Circle in the north and east to Ceylon and Tamil Nadu. But a Mediterranean world thus defined seems rather large. Falling back on the limits of the Roman empire seems an unsatisfactory solution, not least because they were neither static nor natural.<sup>28</sup>

Presumably the limit of the Mediterranean as *The Corrupting Sea* constructs it should be set at the point where the pattern of microregions and connectivity stops. As far as microregions go, France, Britain, and Germany are certainly divided up in much the same ways as the Mediterranean. The Iron Age archaeology of temperate Europe shows a very similar pattern of microecologies. The plain of Forez is quite different from the Lyonnaise, and the east and west slopes of the Massif Central present a number of contrasts, the sharp ecotones to the west of Clermont Ferrand and the specificity of the plains of the Limagne present very much the same pattern of localized contrasts illustrated in *The Corrupting Sea* by the Biqa Valley and southern Etruria.

If the ubiquity of microecologies is admitted, then the limits of the Mediterranean, thus conceived, must lie in changes in the level of 'connectivity'. Perhaps we are invited to imagine the Mediterranean world as a zone of low-friction communication surrounded by zones in which information and goods move more slowly? Up to a point this is plausible, although such a thesis would need some help at the point (Egypt, in fact) where the Mediterranean high-velocity environment abuts the Indian Ocean system. It remains to be shown, however, how much slower traffic was beyond the Mediterranean edge. During the Neolithic period the exceptionally pure yellow flint of Grand Pressigny on the limit of the Massif Central and the Loire Valley, the green sandstone of Cumbria, amber from the Baltic, and *Spondylus* shells from the Mediterranean were traded hundreds of miles. Interconnections – commercial, technological, religious – between the Greek world and India, Persia, and beyond are well attested from the Hellenistic period. Did the steppes form some sort of limit? But, like the deserts of North Africa and Syria, these regions too may be subdivided on ecological criteria, and the kinds of nomadism that evolved at both ends of the Eurasian steppe were dependent on symbiotic relationships with semi-nomadic and settled communities of the forest edges and, in some places, of the coastal plains.

Perhaps some of this traffic was of low volume, and, insofar as the goods were not prestige goods with a central role in the societies that imported them, perhaps some of this connectivity was trivial. But even if we could quantify the transfers concerned it would be difficult to show that, for example, the use of Mediterranean silver coin within the Carpathian circle was less important than that of painted Greek pottery in Etruria half a millennium before. Certainly in Late Iron Age Europe there are few signs of the sort of divergent stylistic trajectories that we might have expected if continental microregions were

significantly less connected to each other than was the case further south. A broadly shared technological, artistic, and perhaps linguistic culture stretched from Ireland to Romania and from southern Scandinavia to central Spain. Coins, wheel-turned pottery, metal tools, and monumental ramparts were made in much the same way. There were endless local versions and transformations of this cultural *koine* but they seem to be the product of local choices rather than the limits of communication. Scarcity and risk were manifested differently, and exchanges of bulky goods were probably less common, but people and information moved very large distances.<sup>29</sup> On the rather different eastern frontier there is ample evidence of trade in goods as well as people and information from the Levant to North India and occasionally beyond. The reality of some level of connectivity east from the Mediterranean will prove fundamental in the next and final section of this paper.

For the moment, however, the case for specifically Mediterranean religious forms looks weak. The burden of proof rests with those who wish to show that 'Mediterranean religion' is more than a flag of convenience that enables classicists to get together with colleagues from Jewish Studies or Divinity departments.

#### ANCIENT RELIGIONS IN SPACE

There is a final way to approach the question, and that is to leave the Mediterranean, in all its shifting senses, and ask how ancient religions were patterned in space and why.

There is an immediate objection to this approach, which may be exemplified in relation to the cult of Mithras. Many modern writers describe Mithraism as a religion, meaning by this that it was invented at a given moment by a particular person or persons and spread from that point in essentially the same form and that adherents of Mithraism conducted essentially the same rituals, imagined and portrayed the god in essentially the same way, told the same stories about him, worshipped in groups that were institutionalized roughly on the same lines, and were well aware of the difference between their cult and others practised in the same region. Stated this bluntly, it is clear that the status of a religion in antiquity is rather hard to attain. The cult of Mithras is known principally from monuments and shrines excavated in Rome and its environs and from some highly militarized zones including northern Britain, the Rhineland, and Rome's Danubian provinces. It is likely that it was created by a single inventor in the middle of the first century CE.<sup>30</sup> Yet this 'creation' was a transformation of earlier cult to a much older deity, even if it drew on more recent astrological ideas and incorporated social norms characteristic of a Roman social context. Invention or adaptation? The same question could be posed of Christianity before its

decisive break with Judaism, of Magna Mater in relation to the cult of Cybele at Pessinus, or of Manicheism.

This presumed invention is the first and last sign of any centralized organization in Mithraism. Thereafter each 'cell' seems to have been autonomous, and although the frequent movement of worshippers from one area to another in the course of their military careers may have done something to maintain consistency between local practices, it is now clear that regional variations, some of them major, appeared within generations.<sup>31</sup> Once again we are not surprised if we consider early Christianity, with its wide variety of cults and beliefs and its relatively flat hierarchy. Uniformity over space and time is what would surprise.

What about the frontiers of Mithraism? Mithras was often addressed as *Deus Invictus*, sometimes as *Sol Invictus Mithras*, and so for some the cult must have seemed continuous with the various cults of *Sol Invictus*, *Hercules Invictus*, and *Helios* promoted in different forms by Commodus, Elagabalus, Aurelian, Constantine, and Julian. Astrology was incorporated into virtually all major religions, Judaism and Christianity included. *Mithraea* regularly include images of and dedications to other deities, not just those associated with the cult-myth of Mithras but also Roman gods such as Mercury and Venus and Greek gods such as Dionysos and Serapis. None of this is unexpected when we consider that, unlike the early Christians, the worshippers of Mithras<sup>32</sup> were also the worshippers of many other deities.

What are the limits of a religion in antiquity? When does a cult cease to be itself? Who decides the point at which orthodoxy shades into heresy in a religious *koine* that recognizes neither concept? If the worshippers are untroubled by the boundaries between *Sol Mithras*, *Mithras Invictus*, *Sol Invictus*, and *Sol*, then who are we to differentiate and map religions? At this point the utility of 'religion' as it has come to be conceptualized today is in doubt.<sup>33</sup> I chose the example of Mithras because for his cult a stronger case of this kind can be made than for most religions of the Roman empire. Mapping the cult of Artemis of Ephesos,<sup>34</sup> let alone that of Apollo or Mercury, is even more difficult.

If we cannot map 'religions', we can at least map the most characteristic traces of cult to particular deities – their images, dedications, and temples among them. To be sure, this involves the tacit assumption that the identity of a deity is the most central feature of any cult,<sup>35</sup> but we must start somewhere. When we do map these indicators of most common cults, they rarely cluster around the Mediterranean basin like olive groves. Ramsey MacMullen showed some surprising variations between provinces of the empire in the frequency of dedications to the best-attested deities.<sup>36</sup> The explanations for some regional peculiarities are clear: Saturn's popularity in North Africa, for example, represents a widespread syncretism with the chief male deity of Punic Africa. *Silvanus* seems to have been popular in some of Rome's western and northern provinces for similar reasons.<sup>37</sup>

A number of cults had slightly smaller but still supralocal distributions. Most Egyptian gods were not worshipped outside Egypt; Apollo Grannus was popular mainly between Burgundy and Bavaria; Asclepius' main centres were around the Aegean despite his translation to Rome in 291 BCE. A mass of cults of very restricted local distribution characterized the entire Roman world, Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean provinces alike.<sup>38</sup> Just to complicate the picture, many local cults were always the local cults of deities that were much more widely worshipped: the cults of Apollo Archegetes in Greek colonies, those of the Capitoline Triad in Roman ones, and civic cults of the emperor and his family are good examples. However similar they might be to one another, as public cults these were all autonomous and all local.

Perhaps the easiest distributions to map are those of those cults that flourished outside the civic context, cults sustained not by existing social institutions but by their power to attract adherents from within the vast choices offered by polytheism.<sup>39</sup> The worship of Mithras is a good example. *Mithraea* are rare west of the Rhine and south of the Mediterranean. They are also absent from Greece and Asia Minor and rare in the Near East. The epigraphic records of the thousand-odd dedicants identified as Mithras worshippers show the same broad distribution.<sup>40</sup> Material connected to the cults of Isis and Serapis, in contrast, is common in Greece and Italy as well as Gaul, the Rhine and Danube provinces, and of course Egypt.<sup>41</sup> Part of the difference is to be explained by the different institutionalization of the cults. Mithraism, although not confined to soldiers, was probably mainly confined to the camps in many provinces. Its exclusion of women made it better suited to some social locales than to others. Isis rapidly became associated with the festivals that opened the sailing season in much of the Mediterranean and in Italy is best represented in ports. Imperial patronage affected both cults at different periods, and in the case of Isis Rome became the major centre of the cults outside Egypt.

It would be easy to show in more detail how an appreciation of the social heterogeneity of the empire provides a more important context for understanding the distributions of these cults than does an ecologically focused Mediterraneanism. The best demonstration is provided by the linked histories of Judaism, Christianity, Manicheism, and Islam. In these cases it is immediately clear that the spread of cult within the Mediterranean may have been surprisingly slow, especially compared with the spread of each religion eastwards towards Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, and beyond. Mapping either the Jewish Diaspora or the spread of early Christianity is notoriously difficult, but it is clear that both were well established in the Sassanian kingdom around 300 CE at a time when neither had a strong presence west and north of Italy. It is no coincidence that first Christianity, then Manicheism and Islam straddled the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East in the same way. The religions of the book wrote most easily over each other's pages.

Once again the social and cultural contexts available and the previous religious history of a region seem much more important variables than the opportunities offered by connectivity within the Mediterranean world.

#### CONCLUSION

The conclusions of these arguments may seem both negative and unsurprising. Why, after all, should geography exercise anything like the same influence on religion as it does on farming, food, commerce, or the spread of disease? The points made in passing about the politics of Mediterraneanism and about the difficulty of fixing boundaries to a Mediterranean defined in terms of connectivity and fragmentation are perhaps of more interest than the easy demonstration that 'Mediterranean religion' is a mirage. Other supposedly common features of Mediterranean religion – sacrifice, for example, or the idea of a temple or a cult image – might have been examined. In those cases, too, it would have been possible to find parallels from the Near East but also from the Andes. The most useful units of analysis in the study of ancient religion are either larger or smaller than the Mediterranean world.

Classicists have always claimed that Western culture is rooted in the social experiments and cultural creativity of ancient Mediterranean civilizations. So it is, but not all those experiments or all that creativity was unique to that part of the globe. Once we start to generalize, in other words, we need to use the appropriate scale. Often the Mediterranean has been unduly emphasized when in fact it is only 'our sea', one gulf of a larger ocean. Religion is a convenient perspective from which to remind ourselves that the classical world was not a world apart, that in important respects it was part of greater unities. Religious symbols, beliefs, and practices flowed back and forth over the Eurasian land mass and, eventually, beyond it. Much that has been claimed for Mediterranean culture is common to a wider humanity. Mediterranean paradigms, in short, have clearer limits than the sea itself.

#### NOTES

This paper is a version of the one given at the workshop 'Mediterranean Paradigms and Classical Antiquity', at the Center for Mediterranean Civilizations Project, Tel Aviv University (May 2001), and has been much improved by the comments of those who attended. I am especially grateful to Irad Malkin not only for the invitation to speak and for facilitating our debates but also for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Responsibility for its remaining deficiencies remains my own.

Like all papers given in the workshop, this one is deeply indebted to P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).

1. Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*.
2. F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949).



3. I. Morris, 'Archaeologies of Greece', in I. Morris (ed.), *Classical Greece: Ancient Histories and Modern Archaeologies* (Cambridge, 1994), pp.8–47. The central role played by the British and French schools, the German institutes, and the American academies of Rome and Athens in training professionals certainly contributes to the reproduction of this Mediterranean-centred approach to antiquity.
4. Although the account of religion presented by Clifford Geertz in his classic contribution 'Religion as a Cultural System' to M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph 3 (London, 1966) pp.1–46, reprinted in C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973), pp.87–125, has come under increasing attack in the past decade, the critique of functionalist approaches to religion embodied within it remains valid.
5. F. de Polignac, *La naissance de la cité grecque: Cultes, espace et société VIII–VII s. av. J-Ch* (Paris, 1984).
6. I. Malkin, *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean* (Cambridge, 1994).
7. E. Kearns, 'Change and Continuity in Religious Structures after Cleisthenes', in P. Cartledge and F.D. Harvey (eds.), *Crux: Essays in Greek History Presented to G. E. M. de Ste. Croix* (London, 1985), pp.189–207.
8. W.R. Connor, 'Tribes, Festivals and Processions: Civic Ceremonial and Political Manipulation in Archaic Greece', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 107 (1987), pp.40–50.
9. S.D. Goldhill, 'The Greater Dionysia and Civic Ideology', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 107 (1987), pp.58–76.
10. P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (Chicago, 1988 [1983]).
11. This set of connections is not as improbable as it may seem. For an account of ancient religion that grounds the specifics of cosmology in social forms adapted to particular ecological conditions, see T. Derks, *Gods, Temples, and Ritual Practices: The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul*, Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 2 (Amsterdam, 1998).
12. A set of ideas distributed throughout his entire work but brought together in his multivolume work: G. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée* (Paris, 1974).
13. Among many examples, see J. Scheid, *Religion et piété à Rome* (Paris, 1985); L. Bruit Zaidman and O. Schmitt-Pantel, *La religion grecque* (Paris, 1989); C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'What is Polis Religion?' in O. Murray and S.R.F. Price (eds.), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), pp.295–322; R.C.T. Parker, *Athenian Religion: A History* (Oxford, 1996); and much of M. Beard, J.A. North, and S.R.F. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998). One of the themes of D. Feeney, *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contacts, and Beliefs* (Cambridge, 1998), is a critique of 'organic' views of ancient cultural systems. A similar scepticism towards dogmatic applications of the civic model emerges from R.G. Osborne, 'Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece', *Classical Quarterly*, 43(1993), pp.392–405. For further discussion see G.D. Woolf, 'Polis-Religion and Its Alternatives in the Roman Provinces', in H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (Tübingen, 1997), pp.71–84.
14. N.-D. Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique: Etude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* (Paris, 1864).
15. J. North, 'The Development of Religious Pluralism', in J. Lieu, J.A. North, and T. Rajak (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians* (London, 1992), pp.174–93, for the analogy with substantivist economics.
16. Among explorations of this theme which do give attention to city systems, see A.M. Snodgrass, 'Interaction by Design: The Greek City-State', in C. Renfrew and J. Cherry (eds.), *Peer Polity Interaction and the Development of Socio-cultural Complexity* (Cambridge, 1986), pp.57–8; Malkin, *Myth and Territory* (and in this volume).
17. C. Ampolo, 'Demarato, osservazioni sulla mobilità sociale arcaica', *Dialoghi di Archeologia*, 9–10 (1976–77), pp.333–45, remains thought-provoking on this issue. J. Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1998), provides the basis for accounts of religious

- exchange that do not take religious or ethnic identity as a given but see both as structured by interaction between populations.
18. How that form should be defined for use in comparative analysis is a complex question, but note the diversity of non-Mediterranean societies that are considered to have developed 'city-states' by the contributors to M. Hansen (ed.), *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* (Copenhagen, 2000). I gratefully acknowledge the generosity of Mogens Hansen and of the Copenhagen Polis Centre, which enabled me to participate in the colloquium of which this volume represents the proceedings.
  19. For example in G. Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque* (Paris, 1966).
  20. One way they are linked is by the fine discussion in Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, pp.403-60. My discussion owes much to theirs, but I have tried, with only partial success I fear, to avoid writing another response to a book already excellently served by reviewers. I have found the reviews by B.D. Shaw in *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 14 (2001), pp. 419-53 and E. Fentress and J. Fentress in *Past and Present*, 173 (2001), pp. 203-19, especially useful in this context.
  21. See Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea*, pp.411-23, for characteristically rich discussion of all these types and more. S.E. Alcock and R.G. Osborne, *Placing the Gods: Sanctuaries and Sacred Space in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1994), collect a range of different approaches to the localization of the sacred in one part of the Mediterranean.
  22. Building above all on Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).
  23. S. Coleman and J. Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in World Religions* (London, 1995), gives a sense of how widespread pilgrimage, understood in the broadest sense, has been in a wide variety of different religions.
  24. On the reuse of sacred sites, envisaged as *lieux de mémoire*, see now S.E. Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories* (Cambridge, 2002).
  25. See P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, IL, 1981), for a robust criticism of approaches that assimilate martyr cult to classical hero cult.
  26. R. Bradley, *The Passage of Arms: An Archeological Analysis of Prehistoric Hoards and Votive Deposits* (Cambridge, 1990), is a marvellous introduction to this.
  27. The notion of a world divided into Europe, Asia, and Africa is at least Herodotean in antiquity, and the notion that the world beyond the Mediterranean was a foreign place seems implicit in the Egyptian idea of the Sea Peoples, in the story of Jonah, and perhaps in the Assyrian characterization of Yavana/Ionian pirates. Homer's sea too seems shapeless, a space that divides and links exotic locations. Horden and Purcell are, of course, sensitive to this view of the sea, but not all ancient sources shared their sophisticated view of a sea that paradoxically connects what it has separated and divides what is intimately interconnected.
  28. A theme of C.R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1994).
  29. For this characterization of La Tène Europe see G.D. Woolf, 'Beyond Romans and Natives', *World Archaeology*, 28 (1997), pp.339-50, drawing heavily on J.R. Collis, *Oppida: Earliest Towns North of the Alps* (Sheffield, 1984).
  30. Single inventor, R. Beck, 'The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of Their Genesis', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 88 (1998), pp.115-28; Roman social context, R. Gordon, 'Mithraism and Roman Society', *Religion*, 2 (1972), pp.91-121.
  31. M. Clauss, *Mithras, Kult und Mysterien* (Munich, 1990), translated and revised by R. Gordon as *The Roman Cult of Mithras* (Edinburgh, 2000).
  32. Documented and discussed definitively by M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae: Die Anhängerschaft des Mithras-Kults* (Stuttgart, 1992).
  33. For other objections to the use of 'religion' as an unproblematic category for historical and cross-cultural analysis see T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1993).
  34. On the spread of the cult of Ephesian Artemis see J. Elsner, 'The Origins of the Icon: Pilgrimage, Religion and Visual Culture in the Roman East as "Resistance" to the Centre',

- in S.E. Alcock (ed.), *The Early Roman Empire in the East* (Oxford, 1997), pp.178–99, esp. pp.180–91.
35. This is a difficulty when 'the same deity' is common to several religious systems. Classicists tacitly accept this in differentiating Roman Apollo from his Greek *Doppelgänger*, Greek Isis from the Isis of Pharaonic religion, and so on.
  36. R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT, 1981).
  37. M. LeGlay, *Saturne Africain: Histoire* (Rome, 1966); P. Dorcéy, *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion* (Leiden, 1992).
  38. J. Toutain, *Les cultes païennes dans l'empire romain: Les provinces latines*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1906–20), remains the best survey for the western half and lacks a counterpart for the east. On local cults in Egypt see now D. Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).
  39. See J.A. North, 'The Development of Religious Pluralism', in Lieu *et al.* (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians*, pp.174–93; R. Gordon, 'Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and Its Limits', in M. Beard and J. North (eds.), *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (London, 1990), pp.235–55, for attempts to characterize this phenomenon and relate it to its imperial context; and R. Turcan, *Les cultes orientaux dans le monde romain* (Paris, 1989), for a synthesis and introduction.
  40. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae*.
  41. R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY, 1971); S.A. Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden, 1994). I have not been able to consult L. Bricault, *Atlas de la diffusion des cultes isaiques (4s. av. J-C – 4s. apr. J-C)* (Paris, 2001).